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ABSTRACT

Children enter primary grades at the height of their language learning momentum, and this momentum should be preserved throughout the primary grades. In the last decade there has been a move toward the knocking down of physical walls within the school (nongrading, team teaching, and individualized instruction), but first the psychological walls within the curriculum should be knocked down. This curriculum change may be accomplished by (1) extending elements of the informal kindergarten to the years beyond so that a proper balance is struck between learning on one's own and learning in groups; (2) integrating language arts programs to include writing, reading, content reading, and oral skills; (3) teaching grammar incidentally in connection with the others; (4) using a basal program selectively and applying new technology; and (5) using books written by the children. Encouraging children to select what is to be published or discarded will help to develop criteria of excellence and improve their insight and taste as well as writing. Thus the major components of a language arts program are the children, the teacher, and books. (AW)

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Components of a Language Arts Program in the Primary Grades

Children enter primary grades at the height of their learning power. They have proved their prowess by mastering the sound system of their language by the age of three and they are well on their way to mastering the grammatical system, a process they will complete by the age of eight. (1) They have learned to make language work for them: through speaking, to raise questions, to demand services, to voice their likes and dislikes, to label and classify things around them, to identify their world; through listening, to enjoy the sounds of language, to get answers to their questions, to find out about themselves and others. They have learned the rules that govern language; they don't confuse nouns with verbs, they know how to form plurals and tenses. Any errors they make are the result

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of applying rules consistently (e.g., foots and catched) to words that are exceptions to the basic principles.

All this remarkable power over language children have gained informally, not without help, but without consciously structured help. The more opportunities they have had to interact with adults and older children the richer is their vocabulary and the more fluent their sentences. Ruth Strickland points out that teachers can learn three things about children if they listen to their talk. First, the quality of a child's language reflects the language of his home and neighborhood. Second, the vocabulary a child uses tells something about the breadth of his experiences, real and vicarious, and the extent to which he has talked them over with adults and older children. The quality of his language -- whether it is standard or non-standard -- tells you nothing about his I.Q.; "he learned what there was to learn and learned it as best he could with his own power." Third, how he uses language tells you about his self-concept, whether he is confident and outgoing or timid and repressed. (2)

The fact that children have learned to talk, not through imitating adults but through figuring out the rules of language, is perhaps the most impressive sign we have of their learning power. But there are others. The intellectual curiosity of five-to-six-year-olds is at a high pitch; they want to know something about everything (but not everything about something). For normal children, the attention span extends and contracts, as it does for adults, according to interests and tastes. The same children who fidget and yawn as they wait their turn in the reading group can sit

wide-eyed and motionless through a Saturday morning of cartoons and commercials.

If children enter primary grades with a formidable record of successful learning behind them, and with momentum to continue to learn, the crucial question for teachers is how to insure that they leave primary grades with that momentum preserved, and if channeled, not extinguished. We have been so unsuccessful in answering that question that we find many people talking these days about "alternatives to school" and proposing that education burst through the restrictive walls of an institution. Here and there across the country we have experiments in "schools without walls;" we have storefront schools and liberated versions of the old colonial dame schools. We find some knocking down of the walls within public schools as we move toward open classrooms. And we have dreams of molding a highly technological computerized instruction with the kind of free-flowing spirit of Plato's Academe. Such dreams, we are told, are even now a technological possibility; what prevents their being an immediate reality is that we are psychologically unready for them.

Meanwhile, for most children, the school with walls is today's reality, and once they enter those walls, the free and individualized learning they know outside must be diminished. This is inevitable, for public schools are meant to serve large numbers, and any massing of individuals imposes restraints. Thus, it is only natural for a teacher put in charge of twenty-five children of similar age but very dissimilar levels of maturity to look for ways to group them for instruction. Unfortunately, that search has often resulted in more restraints

than necessary being imposed for the comfort of the teacher and to the discomfort of would-be learners.

Nevertheless, granting that the school has overdone it, we can accept the need for structure and order. We can go further than that and argue that schools are serving society when children learn as members of groups, as well as individually. But surely the transition from a free to a restricted learning environment ought to be made as easy as possible. Indeed, that was the purpose of the children's garden -- the kindergarten -- to help children to get ready for the more structured environment of the next grades. There was a time during the 60's when it appeared that the kindergarten might lose its essential informal character and become a downward extension of first grade, another room where children were grouped for teaching them to read. That trend is being modified, fortunately, and kindergarten is once again becoming the first open classroom, where some children, as they are ready, can notice written language and begin to make discoveries about the rules that govern the writing system.

In helping children to make the transition from self-initiated, unguided learning to the more directed learning of the classroom, kindergartens seem to be on the right track. If in spite of kindergarten and pre-schools, the transition is still too abrupt, the fault is in the too rigid structuring of the primary grades. Hence the move in the last decade or so to break out of the egg-crate structure of the traditional elementary school; hence the move toward non-grading, team teaching, and individually prescribed instruction; hence the appearance of new school buildings, with learning pods, tutoring booths, carrels for

independent study, centrally located media libraries, teacher planning centers, cluster classrooms with retractable walls, mobile storage units, and other architectural innovations. School planners and architects are, of course, way ahead of taxpayers and teachers. They are also ahead of teacher-training institutions, research and development teams, publishers and film producers. So it is not surprising to find in schools that are architectually open teachers building walls from bookcases and screens, staking a claim in which to conduct the usual kinds of lessons. Or to find in independent study centers children copying pages from an encyclopedia. Nor should we be surprised when team teaching experiments rigidify into a sorry kind of departmentalizing. Such problems are a natural consequence when teachers try to adopt innovations without fully understanding why.

It's too bad that teachers have to run to catch up with technology and new school design. No doubt it would be better if teaching ideas shaped the environment, rather than the other way around. Still, we should be grateful that possibilities for innovation are waiting for us. How do we get ready to take advantage of them? First, I think, by knocking down the psychological walls that divide the curriculum into water-tight compartments even in the primary grades. We are taking a small step in that direction when we meet at an IRA session to consider the components of a language arts curriculum, not a reading program. If we view reading and writing as an extension of the total process of language acquisition begun in infancy, we set a philosophical base for our reconsideration of how teachers can assist in the process. We take a further step when we consider how reading and writing, as

well as talking and listening, serve children in learning in every other aspect of the curriculum.

Two items have high priority on the kindergarten teacher's list of things to do: one is to provide outlets for children's creative energies; the second is to find out how far each child has come in his language development. Everything you see in a kindergarten room is slanted towards these ends: the familiar corners for playing house and store; the collections of living and growing things, plants, flowers, fish, turtles, gerbils; the bins of strange and common objects that excite children's senses and stimulate their imaginations; the art corner where ideas can be expressed in paint and clay and other media; the workbenches where children can literally hammer out ideas; the outdoor play areas where children can stretch their imaginations as well as their muscles. Dancing, miming, dressing up, making believe, listening to stories read by the teacher or recorded by others, looking at books, walking tours of school and neighborhood, visits to airports, firehouses, children's museums -- all these feed the imagination and loosen tongues. And the teacher listens.

The kindergarten is a large and noisy place, and for very good reasons, but there must also be periods of quiet. However, when the teacher turns off talk, she must have a legitimate purpose. Listening to a story or to music is a good reason; watching a film, filmstrip, puppet show, or a performance by other children is a good reason. Waiting one's turn to respond to a workbook exercise or matching letter shapes on a ditto sheet -- such activities have low priority. When they enter the kindergarten curriculum, they come after the needs for

thinking, feeling, expressing, talking have been satisfied.

In an integrated language arts program, writing begins early. As soon as children can use fingerpaints, hold a brush, crayon or pencil, they can create a picture. Soon they can tell a teacher or older friend a story to go with the picture, perhaps at first just a title or a caption. In kindergarten they may "write" in this sense both individual stories and group experience charts. By the time they enter first grade they are very familiar with print and the reasons for writing. They have seen teachers write directions, poems, stories, weather news, lists of room helpers, etc., on the chalkboard. In kindergarten, or at home in front of the television set, they have learned to recognize many letters, to match letters, find them in words, to name some letters. In first grade they begin tracing and writing letters in manuscript, and this practice reinforces their learning of letter names and sounds. Soon they are tracing and writing words which they will encounter in their pre-primers.

Having mentioned pre-primers, let's consider the place of basal readers in the total language arts program. They are there, and usually in a central position, because most teachers want the security of a well-organized program based on the systematic introduction of new words and the consistent repetition of the words introduced. Because basal series provide this security, they should liberate the teacher rather than restrict her. With a consistent line of reading development as the core of a total language arts program, the teacher is free to modify, enrich, elaborate upon basic plans, confident that she will not overlook essential skills. While the teacher can borrow a measure

of confidence from a well-organized system for teaching reading, she has also to bring self-confidence to the task, enough so that she uses a series critically, selectively. The basal series can become a deadly weapon in the hands of the timid teacher, who fears to omit anything, who follows the manual without any understanding of its purposes, or her own. This is the teacher who understands very little about children, or how they learn to read. If the majority of them learn to read, and they usually do, it is because they have figured out the system in spite of the teacher.

Wise decisions as to what to omit from a basal program depend on the teacher's skill in analyzing children's progress in reading. Diagnostic teaching is the skill, or art, that is what we really mean when we say that the teacher, not the method, makes the difference. Knowing what to leave out of a basal program, knowing what to include in an individualized program, is a matter of knowing how, whether, in what ways each child is learning. We'll have more to say about diagnostic teaching later, but at this point, let me offer a few general principles on using a basal program selectively.

Teachers tend to stick closely to the directed reading lesson and to use all the skills exercises, workbook pages, and ditto sheets that the publisher can provide. They tend to leave out the "related activities," the follow-up enrichment which develops language arts and skills other than reading. This is unfortunate, especially so if the time is squandered on drilling children who either "have" the particular skill or are not yet ready for it. No responsible teacher wants to minimize decoding, whether her approach is basal oriented or wholly individualized

but how much emphasis is the optimum can be determined only with reference to real children. Certainly, not every child needs every exercise in a packaged program; certainly, some children need more practice, or a different kind.

The same kind of balance needs to be maintained in the development of comprehension, the main focus of the directed reading lesson. Not every child, nor every group, needs all the purpose-setting questions posed by the manual, nor all the dissecting of meaning that follows every selection. The skillful teacher is as wary of asking too much as too little. With fast-moving and average groups, she frequently assigns a whole selection to be read silently without interruption and checks on comprehension through open discussion, not too prolonged. With slower moving groups, it is just as important to pace the lesson to their interests. If the teacher finds herself asking this group too many questions and badgering the children to get answers, the material is probably beyond their instructional level. When skills development is carefully coordinated with the text to be read, and specific skills preparation precedes the reading, then children can be trusted to read the selection without cross-examination.

What about the suggestions for enrichment? I have said that these are frequently glossed over, and should not be. Of course, here again the teacher selects according to her total plan. At the beginning of each new book, the teacher should study all the suggestions for enrichment and gather for the library corner as many as possible of the listed books, filmstrips, and recordings. Some of these will be used quite independently, others she may want to reserve for a special

tie-in with a basal lesson. If the teacher skimps the manual's suggestions for enrichment because she has better ideas herself, that's quite all right; if she skimps to save time for phonics or filling in blanks in the language workbook, she is undermining the language arts program. For the teacher with not-so-many ideas of her own, the enrichment sections of basal manuals offer a core around which a total language arts program may be developed quite easily, with strong relationships to what the children are reading. Teachers will find excellent suggestions for personal writing, as well as writing stimulated by reading or listening to stories; for studying word meanings and their functions in sentences; for relating art and music to reading; for developing library skills; for creative dramatics and improvisation. These are all components of a total language arts program.

Today teachers can choose from more than twenty different basal series, and most primary teachers choose more than one series. Probably the practice of grouping children for basal instruction will persist, but some teachers are now assigning different series not only to groups but to individuals. Nearly all primary teachers incorporate into a basal program certain components of what has become known as "individualized reading." Children select their own books and pursue personal reading at their own pace, sometimes concurrent with group instruction in a basal, sometimes for a six-to-eight week interval between, or after, basal readers. Teachers try to include individual conferences, easing themselves and their children out of exclusively group instruction. Nevertheless, finding time remains the biggest problem. Some teachers substitute conferences for group instruction with the fast readers

while retaining the slower readers in group instruction. Others find that individualizing other aspects of the curriculum, such as mathematics, spelling, and word skills, making use of programmed materials and learning activities packages, releases them for more conferences. Even teachers who have abandoned grouping entirely, however, worry about time for individual conferences. As an answer to these worries, proponents of individualized reading are forced into proposing schedules and formulas for "conferencing" which may distort the real purposes. The immediate solution seems to be to increase the ratio between pupils and adults, bringing in volunteers, paraprofessionals, high school and college student aides. A more basic solution may come from asking why conferences are necessary anyway. To lend moral support? To evince interest? To show we care? To stimulate more reading? To diagnose learning? To teach word skills? To clarify matters of comprehension? To open up a child's thinking? All of these are good reasons, but some are better than others. Some require professional teaching competence, others can be achieved by any sympathetic adult or older child. Some require a quick check, others a thoughtful, relaxed conversation. Some could be achieved just as well, or better, in groups. The answer to how much time for conferences depends, it seems to me, on two factors: the abilities of children to learn on their own and the degree to which teachers resort to individualized reading as a single approach. The more securely children learn the basic skills in the beginning the more freedom they should be permitted in pursuing their own interests. The individual conference is an apron-strings operation, not at all characteristic of freedom to learn.

We need to look not only for better ways to individualize on a one-to-one basis, but how to individualize within the group. Can we get rid of waiting one's turn in the group? Can we have children answer in unison, either by holding up cards or fingers, or on occasion orally? Can we replace reading round the group with partnership reading?

Individualized learning has, of course, quite limited values in the total language arts program. It is no good at all for developing speaking and listening. And reading and writing, though they are solitary pursuits, both profit from discussion before and after. As we reinforce connections among the language arts, and break down walls within the whole primary school curriculum, we would do well to improve our techniques for working with groups of different sizes and composition.

In a grade three classroom, the day begins with everyone working on his own, some reading, others finishing up a science project from the day before, some taking a spelling test that has been taped, most children writing in their journals or day books. After thirty minutes or so, the teacher calls together a first group for reading instruction and subsequently this group breaks into two's for partnership reading. For the next twenty minutes, the teacher checks with children who are pursuing information for a social studies report. As she forms another reading group, other children begin to work in pairs or three's or four's. Several times during the day she calls the whole class together, once to introduce a new unit in science, another time to talk over a class project for parents' night, later to listen to the next chapter in a book she is reading to them. In the beginning of the year, this grade three teacher was constantly on call, flitting from one child to another,

from group to group, sorting out materials, settling differences, answering questions, helping Susan find the right word for her poem or Fred to find the right reference on butterflies. As the year progressed she found she could confer longer with individuals and groups as the children learned to do more for themselves. Now and then she had a chance to observe and record her notes on individuals, though most of this log-keeping still had to be done at the end of the day.

The more fluid and flexible the language arts program is on the surface the more firm it must be at its foundations. Essential to the structure, as we have said, is the teacher's ability to diagnose language skills. What kinds of questions does a child have ready answers for? Do his errors in oral reading show that he is not paying attention to context? Does he consistently confuse certain vowel digraphs? Does he skip strange words or miss syllables when he tries to identify long words? Does this child read voraciously and spell creatively? Does one spell and punctuate meticulously but have trouble drawing inferences and recognizing main ideas? What reasons lie behind the performance? The question, basically, is what kind of child is this who reads and writes in these ways.

Diagnostic teaching implies a lot of testing but not necessarily of the formal kind. Everything a child does in the classroom indicates something about his learning style and achievement. What he says and writes, how he reads and responds to his reading, are there to be observed and evaluated every day, or almost every day. The trick is to systematize the observations so that they can be reviewed and acted upon. Some teachers keep a file card or notebook page on each

child and try to record notes on six or eight children each day. In addition, they systematically test oral reading skills using an informal reading inventory, and from time to time give silent reading tests.

Almost anyone can administer informal -- or formal -- reading tests, but skill in interpreting test results is the mark of a professional. Once an accurate interpretation has been made, knowing what to do about it is still further proof of professionalism. More and more the professional teacher's role will be to diagnose and prescribe, while aides take over the actual routines of helping children to follow the prescriptions. This will be especially true in the development of language skills; in the development of the arts of language, as in the related arts of mime, music, sculpture, and painting, the role of the teacher becomes one of friendly critic, consultant, and fellow practitioner.

It should be clear by now that I consider the major components of the language arts program to be the children and the teacher. And books. Trade books matched to the range of children's reading abilities, works of contemporary and classic literature for the teacher to read aloud, picture books to be pored over by the youngest, read, admired, and imitated by the older children, all kinds of reference texts and fact-finding books for children, lots of non-fiction trade books and textbooks, of course, including basal series. About language arts textbooks in the primary grades I'm less sure. But books about language, yes. There are a dozen or more of these, from the alphabet books to The First Book of Codes and Ciphers and All About Language, from which young children can learn as much as they presently need to know about the nature and history of language. And lots of poetry books from which the teacher and children can select poems to read aloud.

Most important of all to a total language arts program are the books children write themselves, their journals and day books if they want to share them, and the books they write for their library table. In a first grade room in October the children shared their own books with me. For one collection the teacher had printed just two words, "I like _____" and each child had drawn a picture of what he liked and dictated the end of the sentence, after which the teacher bound them together in a book for all to share. Others in this collection included "My pet likes _____," "I wish I had _____," "My mother (or father) is _____."

In a third grade, by Christmas, the children had a whole collection of books they had written, illustrated, and bound themselves. Many of these concerned what they were discovering about numbers and shapes; they were works of non-fiction complete with tables of contents and indexes. Books of haiku, cinquains, and other verse forms are commonplace these days.

Books written by children to be read by their peers illustrate one way of integrating the language arts. More important, the publication of children's writing (on the ditto machine, that is) gives significance to communication. Some writing is for oneself alone (and as such it serves therapeutic purposes, helping children to think and feel and express), but most writing is to say something to someone. Publication makes real the need for precision and clarity as well perhaps as heightened expression. Moreover, children should select what is to be published, as they should decide what is to be put on the bulletin board and what

is to be discarded. Thus, they begin to develop criteria of excellence and improve their insight and taste as well as their writing.

Although I have emphasized reading and writing, I am aware that we live in an increasingly oral culture, and contemporary language arts programs reflect that fact. One reflection is seen in the tremendous upsurge of interest in creative dramatics in the last several years. Where it was once considered something of a frill, it is now recognized as central to the education of the imagination, to the heightening of sensitivity. Teachers at every grade level are flocking to workshops to learn how to free themselves for improvisation and how to encourage this kind of involvement in others. They are using improvisation in all areas of the curriculum. In a reading lesson, for example, role-playing is a means of quickening children's interest in a story to be read, or of deepening their understanding of a problem to be encountered. After reading, role-playing is often the natural way to extend concepts and reinforce comprehension, Similarly, role-playing, since it imbues children with a sense of history, is a cornerstone in social studies.

A language arts program that is sealed off from the rest of the curriculum has little validity. Even in the primary grades, children apply the skills of language in learning content, and teachers must be ready to help them make these applications. If a group is using a social studies or science textbook, the teacher guides them in the same way as in a directed reading lesson. Indeed, one could argue that the directed reading lesson is more appropriately applied to content reading than to stories that do not need to be remembered. That is one reason why we are finding today much more non-fiction even in beginning reading

materials. With the growth of independent study, we realize that study skills must begin early. Readiness for reading for main ideas begins in first grade as children learn to classify. They learn to follow a time sequence not just in narratives but in descriptions of a process such as paper making, and they read to follow directions for making a toy automobile, a bound book, or a papier-mache puppet. By their third year of reading development, children are learning to identify a topic, to seek out and select pertinent information, to take notes, and to evaluate critically what they read and what they hear.

In these comments on a total language arts program there is a conspicuous lack of attention to usage and grammar. So far as usage is concerned, the omission implies that skills such as punctuation, plurals and possessives, forming tenses, and achieving sentence variety are best taught incidentally, in connection with reading and writing. Any good basal calls attention to the way writers punctuate and why they use paragraphs. Every good teacher help children to use the conventions of written language as they need them.

The omission of grammar is deliberate. I see no reason for formal study of syntax or parts of speech in primary grades.

There is, of course, the very serious question of what to do about children's non-standard dialects. I would urge teachers to use, in the beginning, the language that children bring to school. That means using the children's grammar in experience charts at first, sticking, however, to standard spelling. Gradually, the teacher introduces standard plurals, possessives, and verb tenses in dictated stories and as soon as possible introduces children to the standard dialect in

pre-primers and picture books. Of course, she speaks and writes her own version of the standard dialect, but she can role-play in other dialects. The important point is that she accepts the child's home dialect and admires his proficiency in it.

We began by considering the awesome feats of learning that children manage before they enter school, and we wondered how we could preserve and cultivate their will to learn throughout the primary grades. We urged that many elements of the informal kindergarten be extended to the years beyond, so that a proper balance is struck between learning on one's own and learning in groups. We suggested that removal of psychological barriers within the curriculum should precede -- certainly accompany -- the knocking down of physical walls within the school.

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1. Smith, Frank. Understanding Reading. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971. Revises this common estimate of the average age for mastery of the sound and grammar systems. He writes " . . . by 3 1/2 years he appears to have mastered all the important rules of his language." (p. 48)

2. Strickland, Ruth. "Children Before Methods" in Report on Reading Conference, New York: New York University, May, 1968.